Russian Short Stories

Happiness

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A Fairytale

A great tzar ordered the poets and sages of his country to be brought before him. And he asked them this question:

“In what does happiness consist?”

“In this,” answered the first hastily: “to be able to see always the illumination of thy Godlike face and feel forever …”

“Have his eyes put out,” said the tzar indifferently. “Next.”

“Happiness is power. Thou, tzar, art happy,” exclaimed the next.

But the tzar answered with a bitter smile:

“All the same, I suffer in my body and have no power to cure it. Tear out his nostrils, the scoundrel. Next.”

“Happiness is wealth,” said the next, hesitatingly.

But the tzar answered:

“I am rich and yet it is I who ask the question. Will a wedge of gold the weight of thy head content thee?”

“O, tzar!”

“Thou shalt have it. Fasten on his neck a wedge of gold the weight of his head and cast this beggar into the sea.”

And the tzar shouted impatiently: “The fourth.”

Then a man in rags with feverish eyes crept on his stomach and stammered out:

“O, most wise one! I want very little. I am hungry. Give me satiety and I shall be happy and will glorify thy name throughout the whole universe.”

“Feed him,” said the tzar in disgust. “And when he dies of overeating, let me know about it.”

And there came two others: One, a powerful athlete with a rosy body and a low forehead. He said with a sigh:

“Happiness lies in creation.”

The other was a thin, pale poet on whose cheeks were burning two bright spots, and he said:

“Happiness lies in health.”

But the tzar smiled bitterly and observed:

“If it were in my power to change your destinies, then thou, oh poet, wouldst beg for inspiration in a month, and thou, image of Hercules, wouldst be running to doctors for pills to reduce thy weight. Go both in peace. Who else is there?”

“A mere mortal,” exclaimed proudly the seventh, decorated with narcissus flowers: “Happiness lies in nonexistence.”

“Cut off his head,” the sovereign pronounced lazily.

“Tzar, tzar, be merciful!” lisped the condemned man, and he became paler than the petals of the narcissus. “I did not mean that.”

But the tzar waved his hand wearily, yawned, and said gently:

“Take him away. Cut off his head. The tzar’s word is hard as agate.”

Many others came. One of them said only two words:

“Women’s love.”

“Very well,” the tzar acquiesced. “Give him a hundred of the most beautiful women and girls of my country. But give him also a goblet of poison. And when the time has arrived let me know and I will come to look at his corpse.”

And another said:

“Happiness consists in having each of my wishes fulfilled immediately.”

“And what does thou want now?” the tzar asked cunningly.

“I?”

“Yes, thou.”

“Tzar … the question is too unexpected.”

“Bury him alive. Ah, and still another wise man? Well, well, come a little nearer, perhaps thou knowest in what happiness consists?”

The wise man—for he was a real wise man—answered:

“Happiness lies in the charm of human thought.”

The tzar’s eyebrows contracted and he shouted in wrath:

“Ah! Human thought! What is human thought?”

But the wise man—for he was a real wise man—only smiled compassionately and did not answer at all.

Then the tzar ordered him to be hurled into an underground prison where there was perpetual darkness and where no sound from outside could be heard. And when, a year later, they brought to him the prisoner who had become blind and deaf, and could scarcely stand on his feet, he answered quietly to the tzar's question, "Well, art thou still happy now?" in these words:

"Yes, I am happy. While in prison I was a tzar, and a rich man, and in love, and with my fill of food, and hungry—all this was given to me by my thought."

"What, then, is thought?" exclaimed the tzar impatiently. "Remember that in another five minutes I will have thee hanged and will spit in thine accursed face. Will thy thought console thee then? And where will then be thy thoughts, which thou didst lavish on this earth?"

The wise man answered quietly, for he was a real wise man:

"Fool, thought is immortal."